

TEXTBOOKS, MUSEUMS AND ARTIFACTS: TEACHING OPPORTUNITIES FOR AMERICAN MILITARY HISTORY

by
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Introduction

War is an inextricable component of the human experience. Despite the best efforts of diplomats, philosophers, and peace advocates military forces many times direct the story of the past. Roman legions, medieval knights, naval armadas, and citizen soldiers appear frequently on the pages of history charged with the responsibility of expanding empires or providing defense against aggression. The current conflict between the United States and world terrorists is only one example of many nationalistic, religious, and cultural impasses whose origins extend far into the past. Historian Victor D. Hanson makes the argument that the terrorist attacks on the United States are simply the latest scene in a historical saga of cultural conflict dating back 2,600 years to the ancient Greeks and Persians.¹ In retrospect the events of 11 September 2001 assume a place along the historical continuum of global conflict.

As a result of the terrorist attacks of 11 September the United States is once again conducting military operations against a foreign enemy overseas. An examination of our past military successes and failures played a key role in formulating a response to this latest threat against American democracy.

An additional unforeseen aspect of the 11 September attack was a renewed interest in America's prior wars. The shock and severity of the terrorist attack left the nation searching for a comparable event in our past. News media were quick to compare the attack with the 7 December 1941 Japanese strike on Pearl Harbor. And as the nation braced for possible war in Afghanistan many "greatest generation" veterans of World War II were interviewed concerning their earlier experiences and feelings on the eve of war.²

The efforts of the media to probe our military past for guidance and clues about forthcoming events support a compelling argument for inclusion of American military history in the social studies curriculum. They sought historical precedent in our military past as way to portray American tenacity and resilience in overcoming horrific events past and present. The media demonstrated that military history expands well beyond the realm of battles and tactics, shot and shell, generals and heroes. By inquiring more deeply into that history journalists and reporters hoped to gain additional insight into probable American reactions.

While the analysis of military history (or history in general) is not an automatic predictor of future outcomes its study oftentimes reveals the origins of discord, offers insight into understanding present conflicts, and assists in avoiding the replication of past mistakes. Examination of civilian controlled American military activity contributes an additional perspective for teachers and students of US history not only for framing current events but also as a vehicle for exploring the distant past. The American military experience parallels national growth at every stage from the early frontier, to the assertion of sovereignty, the development of transportation infrastructure, territorial aggrandizement, enforcing or denying civil rights, and defending our way of life.

Textbooks

Most elementary and secondary students are exposed to some American military history through social studies textbooks. Unfortunately, these texts usually make reference to the military only in times of war. They neglect the contributions of the military in the fields of engineering, science, meteorology, topography, humanitarian aid, engineering, and exploration during times of peace. Moreover, several popular textbooks incorrectly interpret the factors surrounding the United States' participation in the major wars of the nineteenth- and twentieth-centuries.³ Secondary social studies instructors

should proceed with caution if intending to rely solely on standard United States history texts for instruction in military history.

Museums and Historic Sites

Community resources such as museums and historic sites are rich sources of information supporting history instruction. Historian James Loewen in a 1995 study of US history texts asserted that "After textbooks, museums are probably our society's most important purveyors of American history to the public." His analysis underscores the important role museums play in educating students and the public noting that eighty-three percent of "Americans never take a history course beyond high school."⁴ In their 1985 book *The Good Guide* authors Alison Grinder and E. Sue McCoy stressed the popularity of museums because of their ability to "offer real objects—tangible examples of ideas, processes, natural environments, and history."⁵ Furthermore, a 1994 survey revealed that when asked to rank the "trustworthiness" of history sources on a scale of 1 to 10 a sampling of Americans ranked museums highest assigning a mean score of 8.4.⁶

Historical Artifacts and Photographs

Historical artifacts and photographs bequeathed to us from the past enable students to envision the use of the objects in their historical setting. Utilizing well-researched and creatively designed exhibitions many Iowa museums exemplify the ability of material culture to illuminate past events through contact with objects from the period under study. Iowa's museums provide many opportunities for social studies teachers to enhance the learning potential of in-class instruction through direct access to military collections. As Dr. John Votaw, Director of the First Division Museum has written, "A museum that exploits interaction with its visitors by means of its reproduction landscapes, period narratives, images, and sounds can stimulate the learning process by providing the missing frame of reference."⁷ Museum settings impart an essential third dimension to the study of history.

While descriptions and photographs are no substitute for the actual artifact, the objects themselves cannot completely tell the story of America's military past. They require written interpretive support describing the context wherein they were used or saw service. An appropriate and instructive blend of label text and in-class instruction increases the educative possibilities of any collection used to illustrate past events.

A collection of artifacts on the First World War, for example, will achieve a higher level of significance if preceded by a discussion on the United States' entry into the conflict. An olive-drab camouflage wool uniform worn by an Iowa soldier personifies our country's historic reliance on citizen soldiers in time of war. An accompanying trench knife, steel helmet, and entrenching tool may go unnoticed without instruction on the relatively static nature of combat in World War I. A gas mask yields an excellent talking point concerning the adaptation of science and chemistry to the demands of fighting a "modern war." These specialized, mass-produced accoutrements developed and adopted by the belligerent nations in order to protect their soldiers in the hostile environment of the Western front all represent the military dividends of an industrial nation.

Planning for Museum Visits

If possible, teachers should visit the museum or talk to a staff member in advance of a student trip to familiarize themselves with the collections on exhibit. If a pre-field trip visit is possible a discerning eye will recognize objects that emphasize and underscore classroom instruction topics. By informing the tour guide(s) of the subjects under study before a visit, museum staff can prepare for anticipated questions. Pre-visit questions developed by the students are an effective technique for guiding them to relevant exhibits resulting in a more enriching educational experience. Furthermore, a topic driven, focused approach will lessen the chances of students roaming aimlessly throughout the museum and departing with convoluted images of Billy Yank and Johnny Reb fighting Kaiser Bill at the 38th parallel.

Conclusion

In addition to this essay's focus on the uses of American military history as a tool for social studies and history education it is necessary to iterate that all of Iowa's museums contain a wonderfully diverse collection of artifacts, documents, and photographs interpreting every aspect of our shared past. I encourage all educators to make judicious use of these instructional resources available to them at historical sites across Iowa. Many museums have outreach programs in addition to on-site tours. A list of museums and historic sites in Iowa is available on the Iowa Museum Association website at www.iowamuseums.org.

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- ¹Victor D. Hanson, "Classics and War," *Imprimis* Vol. 31 (February 2002): 1-5.
- ² *USA Today*, 7 March 2002.
- ³ For more on this see James W. Loewen, *Lies My Teacher Told Me* (New York: The New Press, 1995).
- ⁴ *Ibid.*, 270, 5.
- ⁵ Alison Grindler and E. Sue McCoy, *The Good Guide* (Scottsdale AZ: Ironwood Publishing, 1985), 17-18.
- ⁶ Roy Rosenzweig and David Thelen, *The Presence of the Past: Popular Uses of History in American Life* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), 15.
- ⁷ John F. Votaw, "The Military Museum as Classroom," *Teaching History: A Journal of Methods* Vol. XIX (Fall 1994): 65. See also in the same volume: David S. Sutter, "How to Plan an Educational Visit to An Historic Site." pp. 71-76.

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